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THE APOLOGETIC VALUE OF MODERN CRITICISM

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The cause of faith has suffered from the metaphor which pictures Christianity as a fortress defended against overwhelming odds, although the figure has been used with a sincere desire to serve the interests of the truth. Doctrines once held to be essential, but now abandoned, have been compared to the outposts of a besieged city, which may be given up without weakening the main position. The idea is true, and the figure might be useful, if we could confine our attention to the one point illustrated. But the picture of the beleaguered citadel and the surrendered outposts suggests much that is misleading and depressing.

When we speak of obsolete dogmas as outlying defenses, we suggest that the domain of Christianity is a set of doctrines; that, if Christians professed belief in the contents of some Talmud in several large volumes, Christianity would be flourishing; but that it would peak and pine and dwindle as the number and bulk of its doctrinal standards were reduced. But the domain of Christianity is the hearts and wills and consciences of men. Again, the church is not a beleaguered garrison; it is a mobile army conducting an aggressive campaign.

In this warfare the service of criticism is twofold: it relieves the church of much that would cripple its energy, and also enables the preacher to set forth revealed truth in the most convincing fashion.

I. CRITICISM RELIEVES APOLOGETICS OF FUTILE TASKS

It is easy to label such work as "negative" or "destructive," and to persuade confiding disciples that these epithets settle the question. It would be just as sensible to denounce washing as a negative process which destroys the coating of dirt provided by beneficent nature. Because Christianity is the greatest force in the world,

men are eager to exploit it as financiers exploit the forces and products of nature—coal, cotton, and electricity. Every enthusiast, every maker of theories, every exponent of dogmatics, seeks to secure the tremendous energy of Christian faith and fervor for his favorite doctrine or his pet reform. One is reminded of a familiar sight. A van may sometimes be seen going uphill, with a couple of errand boys on tricycles holding on behind. The church, too, labors forward with a whole string of private and party enterprises tacked on it, and the representative of each of these loudly maintains that the dragging of his particular tricycle is the one thing essential to the safety, permanence, and ultimate success of Christianity. Again, we may take another illustration. Strange stories are told of the transport department of the British army during the Boer war. How far any of them are true we cannot say. But it is said that the baggage wagons of flying columns carried pianos and cooking-stoves and cases of champagne. Orders to leave such luxuries behind were doubtless regarded as destructive criticism. The baggage wagons, so to speak, of the church have been piled high with the opinions, right or wrong, of preachers and divines, prelates, popes, and councils; and the energy that should have advanced the cause of the gospel has been wasted in dragging about useless lumber. Only the constant activity of criticism can deliver the church from these unnecessary burdens, and protect it from the efforts which are made to exploit religion for the benefit of sectarian interests.

Or, somewhat differently, it is vital to apologetics to know what is to be defended or advocated. Current handbooks often seek to establish a number of heterogeneous propositions, an amalgam of precious metals and alloy—truth and error; some things that are doubtful and always will be doubtful, and much that may be true or may not, but is quite irrelevant to the essential truths of Christianity. Here, again, criticism comes in to set aside the irrelevant, the doubtful, and the erroneous, to concentrate apologetics upon the great doctrines which concern man's fellowship and friendship with God.

Thus criticism has relieved apologetics of many useless burdens.

1. *There are many questions of date and authorship with which apologetics is no longer concerned.*—It is no longer necessary to

waste time and energy on the hopeless task of proving that Moses wrote the whole of the Pentateuch; that Isaiah was the author of all the contents of our present Book of Isaiah; or that the Book of Daniel was written by Daniel. These and many similar questions may still be discussed, but it is recognized that they involve no item of essential Christian truth.

2. *It is largely due to criticism that apologetics has been relieved of the fatal difficulties arising out of the popular error that Christianity stands or falls with the verbal inspiration of the Bible.*—Perhaps the greatest relief obtained by modern apologetics—a relief largely due to the persistent activity of criticism—is the recognition that the doctrine of the verbal or literal inspiration of the Bible is not an essential doctrine of Christianity; the earnest believer who desires to appropriate all the privileges of the gospel need not accept verbal inspiration; and the faithful minister who seeks to declare the whole counsel of God need not preach verbal inspiration. An intolerable burden is removed. There is no possible way of proving that every verse of every book in the Bible is inspired in its literal sense. The Acts of the Apostles, for instance, makes no such claim for itself, nor does any other part of the Bible make any such claim on its behalf. The only ground on which the doctrine of verbal inspiration could be maintained would be that it was sanctioned by the church or by the general consent of Christendom. The church has never sanctioned the doctrine, and Christendom has never agreed to it. Here, as in many other cases, what is sometimes popularly supposed to be orthodox is really a heresy, an exaggeration, a distortion, a caricature of the true doctrine of the church. The doctrine is, indeed, laid down by an authority here and there; but, speaking generally, it has no place in the standards, creeds, or confessions of the great communions; e. g. the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the canons of the early ecumenical councils, the Westminster Confession, the Thirty-nine Articles. It is not the teaching of the Bible, nor yet of the church.

At this time of day to write thus about verbal inspiration may seem to be flogging a dead horse; but there is still much misunderstanding on this subject. Not so many years ago a preacher was addressing an audience of workingmen to whom he wished to com-

mend the gospel. He began by saying that the first thing necessary was that they should accept every word of the Bible from cover to cover as the inspired word of God. Similar statements, I fear, are still made in the heat of oratory; and the public are led to believe that verbal inspiration is held by many speakers who would refuse to accept any such formal doctrine in their calmer moods.

But even those who claim liberty in this matter often use it capriciously. We rejoice in liberty when the bondage of the letter is irksome to us; but when the letter suits us, favors our views, and upholds our prejudices, we are eager to make it binding on our neighbor; and if he objects, we denounce him as an enemy of the Bible. The Protestant, for instance, is in favor of a very free interpretation of what may be called Romanist texts, while he insists that Protestant texts are inspired in a strictly literal sense. There are temperance advocates, who, claiming strict views on inspiration, are lax as to such injunctions as, "Give wine unto those that be of heavy hearts;" and some woman who are in general zealous for traditional views seem to have a poor opinion of Paul's teaching as to the position of women in the church. To revert to our former illustration, most Christians think that the baggage wagons ought to carry their own little luxuries, but should not be cumbered with superfluities for their neighbors.

It is desirable to lay down principles which will extend the same liberty to all; and here again criticism can make its contribution.

3. *A biblical narrative is not necessarily a scientific, accurate statement of facts.*—An inspired narrative need not always be a perfectly accurate account of actual events which happened to historical personages; it may be only substantially accurate; it may be a piece of tribal history in the form of a story about individuals; it may be an allegory, a parable, or a symbolical narrative; and in all these cases it may be none the less inspired. Some of the biblical narratives whose inspiration makes itself most strongly felt are not actual history; for instance, the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Here, again, there is an immense relief to apologetics. It is no part of essential Christian doctrine that the account of the creation is accurate science, or that the story of Joseph is accurate history. It is no longer necessary to reconcile the Bible with science, or with

the inscriptions, or to prove that Abraham was an historical personage. Such matters may be left to students of history; they are not relevant to modern apologetics.

4. *Christ is the standard of revelation.*—This point is not new; it has always been understood that the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures must be interpreted and corrected by the New Testament, and, above all, that the teaching and character, the life and work, of Christ are the supreme standard of revelation. This was Luther's position. But this truth also has been obscured and perverted by popular theology, and it has been supposed that Christians were bound to defend the morality of all teaching and laws found in the Old Testament, and of all that was done by the worthies of Israel, unless it was expressly condemned by the sacred narrative. Criticism relieves apologetics of this hopeless task. If we find teaching inconsistent with the high ideals of Christ, we need not convince ourselves or teach others that it is a perfect revelation from God. Such passages are men's report of the revelation they received, the new truth they were taught by God. But human understanding is limited, and men state the truth in the imperfect way in which they have understood it. Man's spiritual discrimination is not absolutely certain; he may confound and combine with revelation error received from tradition. Human language is a clumsy vehicle for absolute truth; it needs centuries of spiritual experience to find words and idioms to express the experience adequately. You could not translate the Nicene Creed into biblical Hebrew. The first attempt to formulate a doctrine can be only a very rough approximation.

Let us take an example. It is part of the Old Testament revelation that God hates evil and protects the weak; but sometimes these truths appear in strange disguises. Deut. 20: 10-18 tells us that God commanded the Israelites to exterminate the inhabitants of the Canaanite cities, men, women, children, and cattle; and Josh., chap. 11, tells us that the Israelites obeyed. Again, Exod. 20: 22; 21:20, 21, tell us that God bade Moses make a law that if a man beat his female slave, and she died under his hand, he should be punished; but if she lingered a day or two, he should not be punished, because she was his money. Now, as a Christian who accepts the

Bible as a guide to truth and salvation, am I bound to maintain that these passages which describe God as demanding wholesale, indiscriminate massacre, and as sanctioning the flogging of slaves, are an accurate portion of God's revelation of his character and nature? Anyone who is not prepared to maintain this has no right to use vague rhetoric about every sentence in the Bible being in a literal, straightforward sense, just as it stands, a revelation from God. And if he seeks relief for himself on such points, he has no right to denounce those who seek relief on other matters.

But according to the principle enunciated above, the position is very simple. In each of these passages there is the gold of divine truth, and also the alloy of human error. As to the slaves, what was new and divine was the idea that they had a right to humane treatment at all. The very limited practical application of the idea was due to dull apprehension, traditional prejudices, and vested interests. The belief that it was a sacred duty to massacre enemies was a distorted recognition of the truth that God hates evil, a man's enemies being naturally regarded as very wicked.

These and other examples show that the task of apologetics is made much easier when we renounce verbal inspiration, when we refuse to make the spiritual value of biblical narratives depend on their historical or scientific accuracy, and when we acknowledge a measure of human imperfection in the way in which the truths of revelation are stated. Criticism may claim the blessings which are implicitly promised to those who remove stumbling-blocks out of the way of Christ's little ones.

II. CRITICISM FURNISHES APOLOGETICS WITH POWERFUL WEAPONS

The apologetic value of criticism is not merely negative; it also makes large positive contributions to the advocacy of Christian faith.

1. *The purpose of the biblical narratives is religious edification.*—Criticism does not merely deny that the Bible is a manual of ancient history; it asserts that its narratives are first and foremost and pre-eminently a means of grace. Thus the advocates of Christianity and of the Bible are directed to lay stress upon what is capable of demonstration, if, indeed, it is not obvious to any earnest, open-minded seeker after truth. Criticism thus recalls Christians from

quibbles and quarrels about irrelevant details to the spiritual teaching illustrated by way of warning or example by the characters of sacred story.

2. *The recognition of the composite nature of many books of the Bible.*—Many books of the Bible are composite. Large portions of their contents were not written by the authors of the books in their present form, but borrowed by them from earlier works. The Pentateuch, for instance, was compiled from older documents; and the Book of Isaiah is a collection of prophecies, an anthology compiled long after the time of Isaiah. The authors or editors, therefore, of our present books were not originally responsible for the statements they contain. They simply place this older material before us, that we may read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them. They do so in the belief that such studies will be for our spiritual welfare; but they do not necessarily indorse all that they record.

This recognition of composite authorship is a very shield of faith which quenches the fiery darts of skepticism. One great difficulty thrust upon us by verbal inspiration is that *prima facie* the Bible so often contradicts itself, sometimes in successive chapters, or even paragraphs. But this ceases to be a difficulty when we understand that these contradictory statements are not actually made by the authors of the present books, but merely borrowed from older works. When a writer quotes two contradictory accounts of an incident, he does not indorse either; he is not giving his own view at all, but says, virtually: "I present you with such evidence as I have been able to collect, and leave you to draw your own conclusions."

Let us take an illustration. A war correspondent has died, and his notebooks are examined by his literary executor. In one of them are found two inconsistent accounts of an incident in the siege of Port Arthur. We should at once understand that he did not give his own story of the event, but preserved versions of the affair given by two conflicting authorities. These notes were not meant for final, positive history; they are simply material from which history is to be constructed. Many of the narrative portions of the Bible are the notebooks of ancient scholars; their contents are not so much history as the material for history.

The principle may be extended to the Bible as a whole. Sometimes inconsistent accounts of the same event are found in different books. In such cases the Bible does not commit itself to any account, but preserves evidence from which the story may be reconstructed. If, without irreverence, we may venture to speak of God as the author of the Bible, we cannot think of him as presenting us with a number of inconsistent statements and requiring us to believe that they are all exactly true; but we can understand that he has preserved a set of data, and left us to write the history; just as in the structure of the earth he has presented us with certain data, and left us to construct a science of geology.

3. *Progressive revelation*.—This principle sets forth God's dealings with men in a most impressive fashion. We are shown God devoting himself for thousands of years to the moral and spiritual education of the race; he adapts his teaching with infinite patience to the limitations of primitive times; as man's capacity develops slowly, generation after generation, God by slow degrees makes himself more fully known. But religion has not always advanced; again and again there have been a reversion to savage superstition and immoral fanaticism, and a failure of faith, insight, and fervor. The divine love has not abandoned its task; seeming defects have issued in more glorious triumphs. At last the incarnation was the climax of the divine working.

The Bible records not only successive revelations, but also primitive superstitions, and human misunderstandings and perversions of divine truth. We are thus able to gage in some measure the wonderful achievements of God's grace, and the difficulties that had to be overcome. We contrast the dim twilight of early faith with the midday splendor of Christianity. In the uncertain light and shifting mists of the dawn much was hidden; many things were distorted; what was real seemed shadowy and ghost-like, and cloud-begotten phantoms seemed to have substantial being. We judge, we criticise, such impressions by the visions we obtain in clearer light. And thus, to change the figure, discerning the abysmal depths from which religion started, following its long and painful ascent, we realize the lofty pinnacle on which Christ stands, and are able to believe that in him the fulness of the Godhead is incarnate.

In these and other ways, criticism, on its positive side, enables us to present the Christian faith in a fashion which commands the assent of heart and mind, and will and conscience. Modern skepticism must be met by modern criticism, apologetics, and theology. To allow our young men to face the skepticism of today with mediæval, or rather rabbinic, criticism, is like fighting ironclads with wooden sailing-ships manned with archers.